

## HIS VOICE

Ruth Beyer

It's funny how I still hear his voice so many months after—well, after the accident. When I wake up in the night, or when I'm helping a mother undress her child for a physical, or when I'm getting dinner for big Bill and me, or driving the car, or anything, in my mind I suddenly hear the phone ring and young Bill's voice so confident and mature saying, "Mom? I'm calling from Dave's. We're going over to Sam's for Italian sandwiches. Be home in an hour or so." And I say, as I always did when he had the car, "Be careful." And then young Bill, "Don't *worry*, Mom. You know I'm a good driver. See you later. Hey, I'll bring you and Dad a sandwich." Those were the last words I ever heard him speak. But I keep *hearing* them. Over and over again like a tune I can't forget. When it happens then I begin to relive that whole horrible night once more. I groan inwardly as the memory begins. However, I must continue to relive it as I must continue to breathe. Sometimes I wish I could stop both. If it weren't for big Bill—I guess I should just say *Bill* now—he goes on so, strong, quiet, calm, but I know he's not sleeping nights either. He's eating his heart out, and there's nothing I can do to help except to be with him and stay as close to him as possible.

The funny thing is, I always worried more about young Bill's being hurt in a hunting accident than in the car. He really was a good driver, cautious, considerate. His father and I have seen the results of so many accidents. We've patched up when we could and consoled when we couldn't. We never had trouble convincing our son to drive defensively. Once or twice his father even took Bill across the road to the dispensary to see firsthand the results of careless driving. No, we never had any trouble corralling Bill's driving. But up here in our part of New England, hunting is a way of life. I didn't worry so about the local hunters, but those out-of-state ones who only have a day or so to get their deer and all have buck fever. Some of the narrow escapes we've heard about, and some that didn't escape too—just unbelievable. Al Duchette—he's the local state trooper and

a good friend of ours—tells about the time he was out once with his gun. He had a red hat and red coat on, but a bullet still whizzed by his ear. When he confronted the hunter, a man up from New Jersey, the man said he thought Al was a deer! And young Bill loved to hunt so—went out with his dad and Al every chance he had during the season. So I never rested easy in my mind until I heard the jeep in the driveway and heard the voices of both my Bills. I always had a fire going when they came home and something warm for them to drink, and we'd sit around the fire—me listening to them talk about the one they missed, or once in a great while admiring the one they brought home.

We had such fun, the three of us. When Billy was still very young, I used to worry about not being able to have any more children. It seemed selfish not to share our happiness with others. We considered adoption for a while, but with big Bill's practice growing so fast, he needed every minute I could spare to help him, and we just never got around to adopting a child. We used to laugh about my nurses's training helping me catch a husband, but believe me, living up here—remote and out of the way—Bill would never be able to find a full-time nurse, and I've always been glad I could help him out. I really stopped worrying about depriving young Bill of brothers and sisters when he was twelve or so. One night he came home from a friend's house where he had witnessed a family argument. Nothing severe, but he was shocked anyway. When I put him to bed that night he told me he was glad he lived in our house because he didn't have to listen to his parents quarrel. I hugged him extra tight and right then I decided that if we couldn't give Billy some things we gave him others just as important.

The night of the accident we had one of our best times together. Just that day young Bill learned that he'd been appointed a National Merit Scholar. *National Merit*—here, way up in the back country! We were so proud of him, and he was pleased too, I could tell. He was always such a quiet reserved boy, but that night he opened up a light-hearted self I had never seen before. I was fixing his favorite—steak and baked potatoes for supper to celebrate—and while we waited for dinner he was dancing a little jig out of pure happiness. Big Bill managed to close the office early that night and he came in with a bottle of wine. Young Bill didn't want to hurt his father's feelings so he had

a sip or two with his steak, but then he drained his glass of milk. Watching a youngster reaching out, trying some part of the adult world and then slipping back into reassuring childhood can be so funny in a poignant kind of way. I had left the office early too and had made Billy's favorite chocolate cake for dessert. After we had finished our cake and ice cream (over big Bill's weak protests about cholesterol!), we talked about college. I don't mean to brag, but our son could have gone anywhere to college. However, he put his head down and looked at the table cloth and said that he was going to go to school where his dad went—to Bowdoin as a pre-med student and then on to Harvard if they would take him. When he said that he wanted to go into practice with his father, I don't think I've ever seen Bill so moved—he pushed back his chair and put his arm around Billy's shoulders. And when I looked up at him I saw he had tears in his eyes, but so did I.

After dinner, young Bill left to go over to Dave's, his best friend. He said he'd be back in an hour or so or else he would call us. After he called and said he was going for sandwiches, we decided to go to bed. The last thing my husband said to me before we went to sleep was, "You know, I think we've done a pretty good job with Bill. I really do."

It was about 11:00 and I was so sound asleep I couldn't wake up. In the distance I heard a bell ringing and I couldn't climb up from the pit of sleep long enough to decide if it was the telephone or doorbell. While I was trying to decide, Bill stumbled out of bed and then I knew it was the doorbell, for our phone is right by the bed. I heard voices mumbling downstairs and then suddenly, I was awake—wide awake. I hurriedly put on my robe, for I knew I had to get downstairs to Bill as soon as possible. And when I did I knew something was wrong, for there was Al and I had never seen him look so wracked. Bill reached out wordlessly to me and I took his hand while I looked at Al for an explanation that I didn't want to hear. Al said without looking at either of us, "It's young Bill. He's been in an accident." Then he looked helplessly at Bill and said, "He's dead, Doc."

Idiotically, I thought, "But I worried so about a hunting accident!" I don't know how long we stood there. I couldn't breathe—my chest hurt. My knees were shaking. I felt Bill's grasp tighten on my



fingers, but I couldn't respond. I just looked at the badge on Al's shirt glinting in the lamplight. Finally from far away I heard Al say, "You've got to come, Doc. The other driver is hurt bad, he's bleeding something awful. I've got him in your office." Still we stood there, paralyzed, no more able to move than to look at each other. Again Al pleaded, "Doc, you know I'd give anything not to be here tonight telling you this. But the other driver will die if you don't get over to him."

Bill reached for his short, fur-lined hunting coat on the wall rack, the one young Bill had helped me select for a Christmas present last year. He turned to me and said softly, "You don't need to come. I can manage. I'll get back to you as soon as possible." I felt as if I were suffocating. I just couldn't breathe. But I shook my head and reached for my old car coat.

The crazy things you remember! I remember it was cold that night, and so starry that we didn't need the light from Al's flashlight to guide us across the road. The snow lay white all around us and crunched noisily under our feet, and I remember thinking of Bill's saying so long ago why he had chosen a small-town practice over a more lucrative one in the city. "I want to see white snow on the ground when I look out, not dirty slush," he had said and I never argued with him. We always had enough to keep us housed and clothed decently, even if we couldn't take the fancy cruises that some of his classmates did.

While we crossed the street, Bill said quietly, "How did it happen, Al?"

Poor Al! I had never heard him choke so, almost sob really, when he answered, "You know how the road curves coming back from Lewiston. The road was clear but there was this little icy patch. Young Bill had dropped Dave off and was coming along about 40 miles an hour, I judge from the tire marks, when another car coming toward him driving much too fast skidded and crashed head-on into Bill." He coughed and cleared his throat loudly.

Crossing the road seemed to take an eternity, but then I heard Bill say, "Who was the other driver? Anyone we know?"

At first I thought Al hadn't heard the question, but then he mumbled, "Henry Higginbottom." Henry *Higginbottom*! The fog cleared momentarily and I was filled with outraged fury. Henry

Higginbottom was a classmate of Bill's at Bowdoin long ago. When Bill went on to medical school, Henry went to Yale as a law student. Did brilliantly too. When he came back here to practice everyone thought he wouldn't stay in small-town law for long. We thought he was probably aiming for the statehouse. And I really think he was. The only thing, on the way there he kept pausing for the drink that refreshes, and I don't mean Coke. By the time he was thirty-five he was a confirmed lush, and his political ambitions had faded away into alcoholic fumes. Someone told me that he survived on a small inheritance left him by his mother—he always was his mother's favorite. The last time I saw him before that night he had been wearing the dirtiest, most worn-out, brown tweed suit I ever saw, and he was so drunk he kept holding on to the side of the building as he stumbled along. I didn't even speak to him—he wouldn't have seen me anyway.

When we opened the door to the dispensary, the bright fluorescent lights contrasted painfully with the soft starlight outside. After all these years of working there, helping dress painful cuts and bruises, answering the phone, I suddenly noticed in a way I never had before the antiseptic smell so pervasive throughout. With the smell and the bright lights reflecting off the chrome appliances and instruments, my fury gave way to dizziness and weakness. Bill gave me one last hard squeeze on my fingers and then walked over to the examining table where the crumpled form of Henry Higginbottom lay. Filled with loathing, I looked at that rumpled, bearded man, still wearing the same filthy suit I had seen on him before. Blood was everywhere, it covered much of the filth on his suit and spurted from several bad cuts on his face and arms, and shreds of broken glass clung to him and crunched under our shoes. At the noise of our entry he opened his bleary, bloodshot eyes and began to weep convulsively while he began in a maudlin way to explain and apologize. My husband cut him off with a curt, "Shut-up!" and proceeded to do what was necessary to stanch the bleeding. It was apparent that he would need hospitalization, and a part of me was aware that Al was telephoning for the local volunteer fire department ambulance to take him there.

I don't know how much time passed while I stood there, dumb, furious, and sick, staring at Henry, hearing even then my son's voice over and over again, while I watched my husband, his lips com-

pressed, doing what he could for Henry. It couldn't have been too long though before I heard sirens in the distance, and then Al was opening the door for the men to bring in the stretcher. The only noise in the room was Henry's maudlin crying and mumbling apologies, and outside I could see the red flasher light as it revolved around the top of the ambulance.

As the men wheeled Henry out into the night Bill came over to where I stood, put his arm around me, and began to curse quietly in an unbroken stream. I've never cared for language like that, but that night I wanted to yell and scream and curse too. I couldn't though—I was just too sick and shaky. Instead I just stood, looking nowhere in particular, and then I noticed Al. He was sitting over in a corner, looking at the floor and twirling his cap endlessly. He had loved that boy, too.

It seems to me that moment was our last quiet time together before we were caught up in all of the to-do of burying our son. Who was it who said that burying your child is so unnatural?

It's been several months now, and I still feel just as leaden and stuporous as I did on that awful night. Oh, I *wish* I could stop hearing Billy's voice going endlessly on and on, "Hello, Mom? I'm calling from Dave's. We're going on over to Sam's for Italian sandwiches—"